

Harmful Stress at Work

We live in dynamic times where science and technology provide great challenges, opportunities and threats. Many of these technological advances have been the result of the efforts of NASA and our dedicated employees.

Our desire to be world class leaders can cause a certain amount of productive stress in the workplace. This positive stress inspires us to do things that no other organizations can do and to succeed in inspiring our Nation and the world. But in some situations, the stress of overachieving can build to harmful levels. Instead of bringing out our best, it can negatively affect our performance. Even worse, studies by the Duke University School of Behavioral Medicine have shown a correlation between negative stress and physical illness.

As a dedicated NASA employee, you are empowered to work in a more stress-controlled and productive workplace. We must take charge of our individual situations; taking care of important and difficult tasks first, organizing our time, and setting and resetting priorities. We must be realistic about what we can change and avoid setting up our colleagues and ourselves for frustration or failure. We should take care of our physical health by consuming a healthy diet, having a regular exercise program, and getting adequate sleep. Finally, we should not neglect our private lives. We must achieve a reasonable balance between our work and our personal lives.

Our goal should be to ensure all NASA employees have healthy lives and function their best everyday. I am asking all Center Directors to review their operations. It is our goal minimize harmful stress that can cause anger, isolation, absenteeism, and hostility in the workplace, by offering information and training through our Center

Employee Assistance Programs. These programs will help supervisors get the training they need to recognize signs of impending problems—the warning signs of harmful stress.

The American public shows great interest in NASA's space mission and research projects. We owe it to the American public, and no less to our employees, and ourselves to have a workplace that ensures a safe and positive environment. Let's work together to open the space frontier and to reduce harmful stress at NASA.

NASA Actions

Principal Center

- Use Employee Assistance (EAP) consultants to assist NASA EAP's by providing best private industry metrics for identifying harmful stress—Task Completed.
- Develop standardized reporting criteria for all EAP visits, to better identify problem areas—In Progress.
- Contract with Duke University School of Behavioral Medicine to present LifeSkills training to all centers in FY 2000—Task Completed.
- Develop research project with Duke University to quantify harmful stress and resultant medical problems. Conduct concurrently with the LifeSkills training, study results will allow comparison to private industry—In Progress.
- Provide anonymous telephone Screening Depression Survey to all NASA Center employees, their families and contractors—Task Completed.

NASA Centers

- Establish programs that address potentially harmful stress. Employee Assistance Program (EAP) personnel, Human Resources and Occupational Medical personnel should identify training courses for stress reduction and productivity enhancement.
- Evaluate possible work modifications to reduce stresses.
- Encourage personnel to plan to take time off to decompress from work stresses.
- Encourage participation in Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to learn methods for alleviating stress.
- Publicize availability of telephone Depression Screening Survey project, currently available through December 31, 1999.

Background

Listed are some of the strategies for reducing job stress as recommended by the National Mental Health Association:

- Take charge of your situation. Take care of important and difficult tasks first. Organize your time. Set and re-set priorities.
- Be realistic about what you can change. Don't set yourself or your colleagues up for frustration or failure. Set attainable goals; do what's possible.
- Address one task at a time. With prioritization of tasks and organizing work into manageable tasks, you can be more productive and less stressed.
- Take care of your physical health. A healthy diet, a regular exercise program, and adequate sleep are vital to all employees' well being.
- Don't neglect your private life. A reasonable balance of work and one's personal life has been a long recognized as an essential to health and happiness.
- Learn to relax. Spend time with the kids, take a walk, enjoy a hobby, and take a vacation.

Each NASA employee is a dedicated professional and is empowered to work in a more stress-controlled and productive workplace.

We must recognize that stressful situations at work may exact an emotional, medical and productivity toll on our employees. Those most vulnerable to harmful workplace stress are those who feel they have high demands in their workplace with little control over the situation. This stress among individual employees might also adversely affect the organization's performance. Symptoms to look for are increased employee complaints of fatigue, insomnia, heartburn, and ability to concentrate. More serious situations may produce increased absenteeism (use of sick leave) of a noticeable decrease in job performance (e.g., work slow down, missed deadlines, reduced quality of work, loss of interest).